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ENGLISH 391: COMPOSITION FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

Lesson Plan for the Teaching Dialogue

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Foreword

One of the most important assets to instruction rests within the communication process. A picture that comes to mind is the diagram of two-way communication, which begins with the communicator. This person sends a message to the receiver, who returns acknowledgment of understanding through feedback. In the exercise that I am about to outline for a classroom discussion and assignment, the communication process appears in several forms. Specifically the exercise focuses on verbal communication. Within our creative writing studies, I have decided to take one class period to carefully examine dialogue and one class period that follows to evaluate our progress, both collectively and individually. I see dialogue as an incredibly powerful creative writing skill that is so often taken for granted. Human beings, and in this case students, speak every minute of every day and are rarely conscious of their individual styles of conversation. The playwright has made a career from a keen understanding of the spoken word. In this lesson, I would like to bring the importance of speech to the attention of my students.

The Lesson Plan

I will begin this instructional memorandum in the most sensible manner by stating exactly what I wish to convey to my students. As I have said, our current focus is creative writing. My larger objective, which serves as my goal for the entire creative writing unit, is to illustrate to the students the lack of boundaries within creative writing so that my students will be inclined to begin writing on their own. Throughout the creative writing portion of this class we will discuss various skills including setting, plot development, round and flat characters, dialogue, and the showing-versus-telling philosophy, likely the most difficult concept to discuss. I will begin our first day of discussion with an overview of the different styles of fiction. However, the creative writing assignment will begin with

a dialogue. The second part of the assignment will consist of the adaptation of these dialogues into a short story. Through the duration of the assignment, the students should gain a better understanding of what would be described as "convincing" dialogue. In turn, their creative writing should be strengthened by conversation that seems valid and does not appear fake to the reader. This is a skill that, in my opinion, will stretch into other areas of creative writing. In fact, such a skill might conceivably emerge in research papers or other factual writing assignments. If the students learn to make their written conversations more convincing, they may also find ways to make their informative, persuasive, and argumentative essays more convincing.

One of the benefits of the first part of this assignment is that it requires almost no preceding skills in writing. In fact, the only essential skill is the ability to write itself. There is no real need for the students to be avid readers of fiction. Even spelling is not terribly important, though it will most likely play its usual role in this assignment. Another important skill, however, is the ability to communicate. This skill is pivotal in any educational setting. Most notably, students will be required to listen effectively. Careful listening is something that will prove as useful to my students as anything else I might teach them.

As I have previously suggested, this lesson is quite simple in nature. The lesson and eventual assignment will begin with what I will call "small talk." I tentatively hope to reserve fifteen to twenty minutes for this portion of the exercise. During this time, we will hold a class discussion of whatever happens to surface throughout the conversation. I will tell my students that they should focus on their thoughts and just say whatever happens to stir in their minds at the time, supposing that it is appropriate. If necessary, I will begin the conversation with some topic that I believe everyone can relate to, such as lunch period. With any luck, the students will seize the reins of the conversation and make it their own. The purpose of this discussion is to create the mood of unrefined conversation, which, I hope, will carry through to their dialogues. I will suggest taking note of any ideas

and/or statements that arise within the conversation they wish to insert into their dialogues. If the discussion lags, I will take it upon myself to stimulate it once again.

When our discussion is finished, I will continue the in-class portion of the assignment by leading them into the dialogue. The fifteen minutes of relaxed conversation should help them feel more comfortable when writing their dialogues. Plus they will be able to observe the ideas of others and use them in their text if they wish. Basing the dialogue on the text, however, will not be a requirement. The entire dialogue should spring from the imagination as any other creative assignment does. While my class uses the rest of the period to work on their dialogues, I will walk around the room to take a look at their dialogues so that I can make sure that they are on the right track. By doing this I can evaluate how effectively I have conveyed my message. The final success of the assignment will not be assured until I am able to observe the writing assignment, which follows.

The Writing Assignment

Describing the entire assignment to them before the conversation begins might hinder its effectiveness. Instead, I will give them only the initial assignment after we have finished the discussion. In this portion of the lesson, they will begin to draft their dialogues with the ideas that they have written down, as well as any ideas that spring from their imaginations during their writing. This dialogue, which should be about a page in length, will be peculiar in the sense that it will merely be words. There will be no characters assigned to each statement, no plot or setting. In fact, I will actually discourage cohesion within the dialogues. Unrelated, assorted lines of speech will be absolutely acceptable since they will allow more possibilities when the students adapt their dialogues into short stories.

Once the students have completed their dialogues, which I believe should consume only half an hour of time, I will assign them the next portion of the assignment for homework. I do this with the hope that my students will be invigorated so much by what opportunities arise that they will be absolutely delighted to continue the assignment at home. This phenomenon will not be consistent within the class, however, so the homework requirement will force those who are not inspired to finish as well. As terrible as this sounds, it is a circumstance that cannot be skirted. I will most likely allow two or three days to complete this assignment. I can use the class periods that fall between to discuss lesser matters that do not require such lengthy assignments.

Convincing the students that the dialogue has no boundaries will be difficult. If the words that they have written are relative even slightly to the class discussion they may feel bound to fill in the narrative by rules of association. Students might not be compelled to let imagination take control. Grabbing hold of a student's imagination is not easy at all. Students are taught to function quite like a two-stroke engine throughout their education. They are shown how to intake information and, in turn, expel it from their minds in a process that inevitably leads to exhaustion. Convincing them to conceive ideas without first taking them in sometimes proves strenuous. This is a barrier that I will have to overcome as a teacher.

As previously outlined, the initial dialogue should be about a page in length. I have arguments against required lengths for assignments, but at that same time I am aware of their benefits in the field of teaching. A page of dialogue seems to be fairly common to three to four pages of narration to me, however. I believe the students will be able to craft their one-page dialogues easily into three-page short stories, if not longer. A page in my classroom should be about two hundred words. A typical typewritten page consists of about three hundred and fifty words, and two handwritten pages are usually needed to contain the text of one typed page, depending on the size of the handwriting. This should be sufficient for students to set their dialogues to narration.

A great benefit of this assignment is that, like so many other exercises, it hones other writing skills. In fact, though the short story begins with the conception of the dialogue within it, the development of plot, character and setting are instrumental also. And, as previously implied, the students should be able to gain a better understanding of the communication process, whether it is formal or informal, imagined or recorded. A better understanding of communication will serve them in both their classroom environment and their creative writing, if they choose to compose as I hope they do.

I would like to follow this exercise up with another adaptation, this time from a short story into poetry. A key factor in helping students to pinpoint their individual imaginations is careful planning of study. Poetry is perhaps the most in-depth and complicated realm of creative writing. The best way to reach it is by taking baby steps. Dialogue could very well be classified as the easiest constituent of creative writing. Continuing it to narration reveals many of the secrets of fiction. The final step would seem to be adaptation to poetry, the most efficient form of creative writing. In any event, I would only like to see students invigorated by the power of the written word. This is, to me, the reward that an English teacher works toward.

Justin,

This is a rather lyrical description of a deceptively simple lesson plan and writing assignment. The tone of the assignment is appropriate for its content, and your commitment to encouraging minimalist dialogue as a "seed" for further development is both practical and wise.

